

Local water is safe but stinky

Culprit is dead algae from Deer Creek Reservoir

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Water outlook dire for northern Utah; E1. Spanish Fork considers ending flood irrigation ban; B1.

By Donna Kemp Spangler
Deseret News staff writer

You've heard of the Pepsi taste test? Well, a group of Utah taste testers are doing somewhat the same thing, but rather than soft drinks, they are evaluating tap water along the Wasatch Front.

And what they are finding could make the nose wrinkle.

Much of the water coming into the Wasatch Front from Deer Creek Reservoir is tainted with a smell described as "earthy" or "musty" or even like a "potato cellar." And that's after it has been treated.

"It's not a health danger but a nuisance," said Richard Bay, assistant general manager of the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District. "We're aware of it, and we're working on it."

Water officials have determined the cause of the foul-smelling water is dead algae from

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low water levels the past few years at the reservoir. In January the water temperatures inside the reservoir shifted, bringing to the surface bottom sediments that were then sucked into the water delivery systems for the Wasatch Front.

Tests by water conservancy officials revealed levels of geosmin 10 times greater than what a normal person can smell. Geosmin is the scientific name for the organic chemical produced by the decay of algae.

Concerned consumers noticed the distinct odor right away, although not all water was affected.

Florence Reynolds, water quality treatment administrator for Salt Lake City, said there haven't been many complaints from Salt Lake residents because the city mixes water from a variety of different

sources, thereby diluting any tainted water.

"We blend our water," she said.

Central Utah Water Conservancy District and the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District both responded by adding chemicals to the water to get rid of the smell. And they are mixing reservoir water with well water.

Jordan Valley also hired taste testers. "What we're finding is such a wide variation in people's ability to smell," Bay said.

There are still complaints. Customers of the Kearns Improvement District lodged about 25 complaints over the past couple of days. In Provo and Orem, there have been only a handful of complaints over the past week. Jordan Valley is averaging about one a day.

Most Utahns have been spoiled on good-tasting water.

"The last time we've had levels of geosmin was in 1989," said Dave Pitcher, chief engineer for the Cen-

tral Utah water district. "It doesn't happen very often, so when it does customers notice the change."

The water districts are working with a group of researchers from the American Waterworks Association Research Foundation, made up of water experts from around the nation.

"We are lucky in Utah," said Monica Beal, laboratory director for the Central Utah district. "We have such high water quality that we rarely have a taste and odor problem. Other parts of the country have an ongoing problem."

Beal has found that customers are frequently worried about the safety of the water, but she is adamant that scientists have found geosmin produces no health effects.

She called the geosmin problem at Deer Creek a rarity. "Deer Creek Reservoir water is one of the most pristine waters in the country," she said.

E-MAIL: donna@desnews.com

